



President Obama Discusses Southern Sudan Referendum

In an op-ed article published January 8 by the New York Times, President Obama discusses the opportunity presented to the people of southern Sudan by the referendum that begins January 9 on whether to remain part of Sudan.

The full text of the op-ed article follows:

In Sudan, an Election and a Beginning

By President Barack Obama

Not every generation is given the chance to turn the page on the past and write a new chapter in history. Yet today — after 50 years of civil wars that have killed two million people and turned millions more into refugees — this is the opportunity before the people of southern Sudan.

Over the next week, millions of southern Sudanese will vote on whether to remain part of Sudan or to form their own independent nation. This process — and the actions of Sudanese leaders — will help determine whether people who have known so much suffering will move toward peace and prosperity, or slide backward into bloodshed. It will have consequences not only for Sudan, but also for sub-Saharan Africa and the world.

The historic vote is an exercise in self-determination long in the making, and it is a key part of the 2005 peace agreement that ended the civil war in Sudan. Yet just months ago, with preparations behind schedule, it was uncertain whether this referendum would take place at all. It is for this reason that I gathered with leaders from Sudan and around the world in September to make it clear that the international community was united in its belief that this referendum had to take place and that the will of the people of southern Sudan had to be respected, regardless of the outcome.

In an important step forward, leaders from both northern and southern Sudan — backed by more than 40 nations and international organizations — agreed to work together to ensure that the voting would be timely, peaceful, free and credible and would reflect the will of the Sudanese people. The fact that the voting appears to be starting on time is a tribute to those in Sudan who fulfilled their commitments. Most recently, the government of Sudan said that it would be the first to recognize the south if it voted for independence.

Now, the world is watching, united in its determination to make sure that all parties in Sudan live up to their obligations. As the referendum proceeds, voters must be allowed access to polling stations;

they must be able to cast their ballots free from intimidation and coercion. All sides should refrain from inflammatory rhetoric or provocative actions that could raise tensions or prevent voters from expressing their will.

As the ballots are counted, all sides must resist prejudging the outcome. For the results to be credible, the commission that is overseeing the referendum must be free from pressure and interference. In the days ahead, leaders from north and south will need to work together to prevent violence and ensure that isolated incidents do not spiral into wider instability. Under no circumstance should any side use proxy forces in an effort to gain an advantage while we wait for the final results.

A successful vote will be cause for celebration and an inspiring step forward in Africa's long journey toward democracy and justice. Still, lasting peace in Sudan will demand far more than a credible referendum.

The 2005 peace agreement must be fully implemented — a goal that will require compromise. Border disputes, and the status of the Abyei region, which straddles north and south, need to be resolved peacefully. The safety and citizenship of all Sudanese, especially minorities — southerners in the north and northerners in the south — have to be protected. Arrangements must be made for the transparent distribution of oil revenues, which can contribute to development. The return of refugees needs to be managed with extraordinary care to prevent another humanitarian catastrophe.

If the south chooses independence, the international community, including the United States, will have an interest in ensuring that the two nations that emerge succeed as stable and economically viable neighbors, because their fortunes are linked. Southern Sudan, in particular, will need partners in the long-term task of fulfilling the political and economic aspirations of its people.

Finally, there can be no lasting peace in Sudan without lasting peace in the western Sudan region of Darfur. The deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent Darfuris — and the plight of refugees like those I met in a camp in neighboring Chad five years ago — must never be forgotten. Here, too, the world is watching. The government of Sudan must live up to its international obligations. Attacks on civilians must stop. United Nations peacekeepers and aid workers must be free to reach those in need.

As I told Sudanese leaders in September, the United States will not abandon the people of Darfur. We will continue our diplomatic efforts to end the crisis there once and for all. Other nations must use their influence to bring all parties to the table and ensure they negotiate in good faith. And we will continue to insist that lasting peace in Darfur include accountability for crimes that have been committed, including genocide.

Along with our international partners, the United States will continue to play a leadership role in helping all the Sudanese people realize the peace and progress they deserve. Today, I am repeating my offer to Sudan's leaders — if you fulfill your obligations and choose peace, there is a path to normal relations with the United States, including the lifting of economic sanctions and beginning the process, in accordance with United States law, of removing Sudan from the list of states that sponsor

terrorism. In contrast, those who flout their international obligations will face more pressure and isolation.

Millions of Sudanese are making their way to the polls to determine their destiny. This is the moment when leaders of courage and vision can guide their people to a better day. Those who make the right choice will be remembered by history — they will also have a steady partner in the United States.